

Catalog Success

9 Tips to Better Catalog Copy

By Denise McGill

From time to time, it's important to check the shelf life of your catalog product copy. If the copy isn't fresh, engaging or sales-driven, chances are it's outdated and you're probably losing sales. So why not take a few minutes to examine your copy and be honest with yourself: Does the copy sell the product?

Industry giants such as Herschell Gordon Lewis have revolutionized writing trends for the catalog industry. Original, persuasive copy has the power to outperform simple product description and function. Sales-generated copy keeps customers hooked from the first few words to the final bulleted dimension.

Nevertheless, how do you know if your copy is a sales generator? Keep the following nine tips in mind to make your copy sparkle, increase sales and ultimately strengthen your bottom line.

1. Get personal. First and foremost, know your customer to determine the tone of your copy. Age demographics, income and lifestyle all play into the mix. Your customer base is constantly evolving, so it's important to keep communication lines open. Listen to what your customers have to say.

2. Benefits strengthen copy. The intro sentence in copy is most important. Customers tend to skim copy, so the intro sentence should draw them in immediately with a benefit. The product must offer a convenience, solve a problem, improve lifestyle, alleviate a fear or provide some other customer benefit.

The introductory sentence of a “forearm crutch” copy block, for example, reads, “Gain an extra dose of confidence and stability with every step.” In this example, two benefits are stated — confidence (reinforces self-worth) and stability (alleviates a fear).

3. Retire “obfuscating” vocabulary. Your copy should converse with customers in an easy-to-understand manner. Don't force them to drag out the dictionary. Unless you're targeting a specific audience, you stand to lose a much broader customer base.

4. To ramble is to complicate. Avoid long run-on sentences — they tend to be complex with too many ideas jammed into a single sentence. Tighten your copy, or break it into two shorter sentences for clarity purposes.

5. Make every word count. Is your copy tight? Product copy space is typically

limited; too many neutral words or phrases — e.g., with this, there is, these are just a few, you'll be sure — add no value to content and waste space.

6. Copy should reVERBerate. Verbs denote action, allowing customers to visualize, taste, feel, hear or smell the products. In the examples below, verbs begin the copy block. You instantly bring the product to life, and customers get a sense for it without actually having it in their possessions to examine.

- Illuminate outdoor living areas.
- Crunch into golden toffee smothered in chocolate.
- Relax with the melodious sounds of ...

7. Avoid “owner’s manual” style copy. Don’t let copy sound like a fact sheet — dry and uninspiring. Do more than list a product’s functions, sizes, colors or dimensions. Remember, the copy needs to sell and provide a benefit to the customer.

8. Active vs. passive. Active sentences carry more emotion and zest than passive sentences.

- Active voice: Illuminate outdoor areas with a sconce.
- Passive voice: Outdoor areas can be illuminated with a sconce.

Did you also notice that in the example for passive voice the copy isn't as tight as it could be. Two “neutral” words, *can be*, bring no value to the content. To check copy in a Word document for passive voice sentences, go to Tools/options/spelling and grammar and check all that applies. As you do a spelling and grammar check, take the opportunity to correct passive sentences.

9. Buddy system. Finally, read your copy aloud or let a second pair of eyes look it over. Do you stumble over certain words? Is there confusing text that needs to be clarified?

Customers are continuously inundated with product offerings and choices. Stimulating, benefit-oriented copy can capture the fleeting attention spans of oftentimes harried customers. And isn't that the goal — to keep customers browsing through your catalog and not your competitor's? This is accomplished through clear, tight, sales-oriented copy.

With existing copy, you don't necessarily have to throw it all away and start from scratch. Sometimes a copy makeover is all that's necessary. Reword passive sentences, dig deeper for benefits, and replace words or phrases that add no value.

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